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Exploring the Theory-Practice Gap in Translation Pedagogy: Students' Perspectives and Experiences

Exploration de l'écart entre la théorie et la pratique dans la didactique de la traduction : perspectives et expériences des étudiants

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Abstract

This study explores the theory–practice gap in translation education by examining Moroccan undergraduate students' perceptions and experiences. Using a mixed-methods design, data were gathered from 62 translation students at Mohamed I University through surveys and semi-structured interviews. The findings reveal that although students recognize the importance of theoretical frameworks such as functionalist approaches, equivalence models, and strategic decision-making, they face difficulties applying them to authentic translation tasks. These challenges stem from the abstract nature of theoretical instruction, limited exposure to professional-like activities, and assessment practices focused on linguistic accuracy rather than strategic thinking. The study underscores the need for pedagogical strategies that integrate theory and practice, including project-based learning, collaborative tasks, and technology-supported translation tools.

Keywords: Translation pedagogy, theory-practice gap, experiential learning, student perceptions, higher education, translator competence

Résumé

Cette étude analyse l'écart persistant entre la théorie et la pratique dans l'enseignement universitaire de la traduction au Maroc, à partir des perceptions d'étudiants de licence. Fondée sur une méthodologie mixte, elle mobilise des enquêtes et des entretiens menés auprès de 62 étudiants de l'Université Mohamed I. Les résultats montrent que, malgré la reconnaissance de l'importance des cadres théoriques, les étudiants peinent à les appliquer dans des situations authentiques de traduction. Ces difficultés s'expliquent par le caractère abstrait des cours, le manque d'activités professionnalisantes et des évaluations centrées sur la précision linguistique. L'étude préconise des approches pédagogiques intégratives et une réforme des curricula.

Mots-clés : Didactique de la traduction, écart théorie-pratique, apprentissage expérientiel, perceptions des étudiants, enseignement supérieur, compétence du traducteur.

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Introduction

Translation education occupies a unique intersection between theoretical understanding and applied competence. Ideally, academic programs cultivate students' conceptual knowledge while simultaneously preparing them to navigate real-world translation challenges. However, in many higher education contexts, including Moroccan universities, curricula remain predominantly theoretical instruction, often at the expense of practical training (El Maghnougi, 2022; El Karnichi, n.d.; Bennoudi & Cherkaoui, 2023; *Turjuman Journal*, 2021/2022). As a result, students frequently report difficulty translating abstract principles into practical decisions, resulting in the persistent "theory-practice gap" (Kiraly, 2000; Pym, 2012).

Theoretically, knowledge of functionalist approaches, equivalence models, and translation strategies provides essential scaffolding for understanding translation processes (Nord, 1997; Schäffner, 2012). Practically, translators must integrate multiple competences, linguistic, cultural, strategic, and technological, when making decisions in complex, real-world contexts. In the classroom, however, students often encounter simplified texts, controlled assignments, and assessment criteria that emphasize surface-level accuracy rather than decision-making or strategic reasoning (Kelly, 2005; Kiraly, 2014).

The ideal scenario envisions a dynamic interaction between theory and practice: theoretical knowledge informs practice, and practical experience refines theoretical understanding. In this model, learners engage with authentic translation tasks, reflect on their decisions, and iteratively develop competence. Yet, in many programs, theoretical instruction dominates, leading to frustration, uncertainty, and reduced professional confidence among students.

Prior research proposes interventions to bridge this gap. Kiraly (2014, 2016) advocates project-based and cooperative learning, situating students in realistic translation scenarios. Pym (2012) emphasizes competence-oriented pedagogy integrating theory, practice, and professional ethics. González-Davies (2017) highlights the value of collaborative and situated learning environments in fostering practical competence. While these frameworks

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provide theoretical solutions, empirical evidence exploring how students experience and perceive the theory–practice gap, especially in North African contexts, remains limited.

This study aims to address three research objectives: 1) Examine how translation students perceive the relationship between theory and practice; 2) Identify key challenges students encounter when applying theoretical knowledge; 3) Explore the effects of the perceived theory–practice gap on students' motivation, confidence, and professional preparedness.

Foregrounding students' perspectives provides insight into the practical consequences of curricular design and pedagogical practices, informing curriculum reform, teacher training, and assessment policies. This study is guided by Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory, emphasizing cycles of experience, reflection, conceptualization, and experimentation, and the PACTE (2017) translation competence model, highlighting strategic, instrumental, and linguistic competences central to professional readiness.

Literature Review

The Nature of the Theory-Practice Gap

Translation pedagogy has historically grappled with the challenge of integrating conceptual knowledge with applied competence. The theory-practice gap arises when curricula emphasize theoretical constructs without providing sufficient opportunities for learners to apply them in realistic contexts (Kiraly, 2000; Schäffner, 2012). Functionalist approaches, equivalence theories, and skopos-based frameworks offer critical tools for decision-making, yet their classroom application often remains abstract, leaving students uncertain about when and how to apply these principles (Nord, 1997; Vermeer, 1989).

Students' Perspectives

Empirical research highlights that students' perceptions of the theory-practice gap significantly affect motivation and engagement. Rodríguez de Céspedes (2019) observed that students who perceived theory as abstract or irrelevant exhibited lower confidence and reduced commitment to translation tasks. Torres-Hostench (2017) found that students' perceived applicability of theoretical frameworks was strongly correlated with self-efficacy in

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translation assignments. In North African contexts, Al-Qinai (2019) reported structural and pedagogical challenges, including teacher-centered approaches, lack of authentic translation projects, and assessment practices focused on formal accuracy.

Pedagogical Interventions

Several models have been proposed to bridge the gap. Project-based learning situates students in realistic translation scenarios, fostering strategic competence through iterative practice and reflection (Kiraly, 2016). Cooperative learning, emphasizing peer interaction and collaborative problem-solving, enhances contextualized understanding and motivates engagement (González-Davies, 2004, 2017). Competence-oriented frameworks, as advocated by Pym (2012) and PACTE (2017), integrate linguistic, strategic, and professional competences, linking theory with practice and ethical considerations.

Challenges in Implementation

Despite these models, barriers persist. Curriculum rigidity, resource limitations, and traditional assessment methods impede integration of experiential learning (Al-Qinai, 2019; Li, 2018). Many programs continue to prioritize theoretical mastery over applied competence, limiting students' exposure to authentic decision-making scenarios and reducing motivation. Furthermore, faculty training in experiential pedagogy remains uneven, affecting implementation fidelity.

Research Gaps

While the literature provides valuable frameworks and identifies obstacles, few studies systematically examine students' lived experiences in North African translation programs. Moreover, research integrating quantitative measures of perception with qualitative insights into challenges and motivational consequences is sparse. This study addresses these gaps by combining survey and interview data, offering context-specific recommendations for curriculum reform, pedagogy, and assessment strategies.

Conceptual Framework

Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory emphasizes cycles of experience, reflection, conceptualization, and experimentation, all of which

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are disrupted when theory and practice are poorly integrated. PACTE (2017) defines translation competence across strategic, linguistic, and instrumental domains, providing a structured lens for evaluating students' readiness to apply theory in practice. This dual framework guides analysis of survey responses, interview themes, and the integration of theoretical and practical learning in the Moroccan context.

Methods

This study employed a mixed-methods design to capture both quantitative and qualitative insights into students' experiences with the theory-practice gap in translation pedagogy. Sixty-two undergraduate translation students from Mohamed I University participated in the study. Participants were drawn from both English and French translation tracks and ranged in age from 19 to 24. Purposive sampling was used to ensure that interview participants reflected diversity in gender, language track, and academic performance.

Study Design and Justification:

A mixed-methods approach was chosen because it allowed the research to quantify perceptions through surveys while also exploring lived experiences via semi-structured interviews. Quantitative data provided measurable insights into students' perceived integration of theory and practice, while qualitative data captured the richness and complexity of students' experiences, challenges, and motivations. This design aligns with established pedagogical research guidelines emphasizing triangulation to enhance validity and reliability.

Ethics Statement:

Ethical approval was obtained from the Mohamed I University Institutional Review Board. All participants who provided informed consent, were assured of confidentiality and were informed of their right to withdraw at any time. No vulnerable populations were included, and all procedures complied with ethical standards for research involving human participants.

Participants:

Participants included 62 undergraduate students enrolled in translation courses. Inclusion criteria required participants to be currently enrolled in

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translation programs and to have completed at least one course integrating translation theory. Exclusion criteria included students who had not yet taken any theory-based translation courses. Key demographic characteristics included a balanced distribution of male and female students and representation from different academic years.

Instruments and Materials:

- **Survey Questionnaire:** Designed to assess perceived relevance, applicability, integration of theory, confidence in applying theory, and motivation for translation tasks. A 5-point Likert scale was used. The instrument demonstrated strong reliability (Cronbach's alpha = 0.87).
- **Semi-Structured Interview Protocol:** Developed to explore students' experiences applying theoretical knowledge, challenges faced, and perceptions of assessment practices. Interviews lasted 30–45 minutes and were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Procedures:

Data collection began with the distribution of the survey to all 62 participants, who then completed it individually online to ensure convenience and accuracy. Quantitative responses were compiled and analyzed before selecting interview participants. Fifteen students were then invited for semi-structured interviews to provide a range of perspectives across gender, track, and performance levels. Interviews were conducted in a quiet classroom setting, transcribed, and anonymized.

Outcome Measures:

- **Primary Outcomes:** Students' perceptions of the theory-practice integration in translation courses.
- **Secondary Outcomes:** Students' confidence in applying theory and motivation to engage with translation tasks. These outcomes were selected because they directly reflect both the cognitive and affective dimensions of translation learning and professional readiness.

Data Analysis:

Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS version 28, employing descriptive statistics to summarize trends and Pearson correlations to examine relationships between perceived integration, confidence, and motivation. Qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and

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Clarke's (2006) six-step process: familiarization, coding, theme development, reviewing themes, defining themes, and reporting. Triangulation of quantitative and qualitative data provided a comprehensive understanding of the theory-practice gap.

Results

Quantitative Findings

The survey data revealed that students recognized the relevance of theoretical frameworks, with a mean score of 4.0 (SD = 0.6), indicating strong agreement that theory is important. However, the applicability of theory in practical translation tasks scored lower, with a mean of 3.1 (SD = 0.8), reflecting students' perception that translating theoretical knowledge into practice is challenging. Integration of theory with classroom tasks averaged 3.3 (SD = 0.7), suggesting moderate alignment between instruction and practical application. Students' confidence in applying theory scored 3.4 (SD = 0.7), while motivation averaged 3.6 (SD = 0.6), indicating a moderate level of engagement that fluctuates depending on perceived task relevance. Assessment alignment received the lowest mean score, 2.9 (SD = 0.8), highlighting a perceived mismatch between course evaluation and practical application.

Correlation analysis revealed statistically significant positive relationships. Perceived integration of theory and practice was strongly correlated with confidence ($r = .61$, $p < .01$), suggesting that students who felt theory was more effectively integrated into tasks also felt more capable of applying it. Similarly, the relevance of theory correlated with motivation ($r = .58$, $p < .01$), indicating that students who valued theoretical knowledge were more motivated to engage in translation tasks.

Qualitative Findings

Thematic analysis of the semi-structured interviews identified four central themes:

1. **Abstractness of Theory:** Many students found theoretical models difficult to operationalize in practical translation tasks. One student remarked, "We learn the models, but I don't know which to use in real texts."

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2. **Limited Authentic Practice:** Classroom exercises were often predictable and lacked real-world complexity, limiting opportunities for strategic decision-making. A participant noted, "Most exercises are predictable; real decisions are absent."
3. **Assessment Misalignment:** Students perceived that grading emphasized formal accuracy over thoughtful application of theory. As one student commented, "Even thoughtful application doesn't impact my grade."
4. **Motivational Consequences:** Motivation increased when students could apply theory meaningfully but decreased when tasks felt abstract or disconnected from real-world practice. A participant shared, "When I can apply theory, I feel more confident and motivated."

These themes corroborate the quantitative findings, illustrating that students' confidence and motivation are directly influenced by the perceived integration of theory and practice. The combination of abstract instruction, limited authentic tasks, and misaligned assessment contributes to a cycle that hinders the development of professional translation competence.

Integration of Quantitative and Qualitative Data

Triangulating survey and interview data provided a comprehensive understanding of the theory-practice gap. Survey scores highlighted general trends in perceived integration, confidence, and motivation, while interview narratives elucidated the underlying reasons for these perceptions. Together, the data reveal that while students value theoretical knowledge, structural and pedagogical constraints prevent effective application, negatively impacting engagement and professional preparedness.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Survey Responses

Variable	Mean	SD	% Agree/Strongly Agree
Relevance of theory	4.0	0.6	78%
Applicability of theory	3.1	0.8	42%
Integration with tasks	3.3	0.7	55%

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Variable	Mean	SD	% Agree/Strongly Agree
Confidence in applying theory	3.4	0.7	46%
Motivation	3.6	0.6	52%
Assessment alignment	2.9	0.8	25%

Table 2. Thematic Analysis Summary

Theme	Description	Example Quote
Abstractness of theory	Difficulty applying models	"We learn the models, but I don't know which to use in real texts."
Limited practice	Tasks lack realism	"Most exercises are predictable; real decisions are absent."
Assessment misalignment	Grades prioritize form	"Even thoughtful application doesn't impact my grade."
Motivation	Engagement linked to application	"When I can apply theory, I feel more confident and motivated."

Figure 1. Conceptual Model

Placeholder for diagram linking theory–practice gap → motivation → confidence → professional readiness.

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Discussion

The present study provides critical insights into Moroccan undergraduate translation students' perceptions of the theory–practice gap in translation pedagogy. Both quantitative and qualitative findings reveal that while students acknowledge the relevance of theoretical knowledge, significant challenges prevent them from effectively applying this knowledge in practical translation tasks. This gap manifests through abstract instruction, limited exposure to authentic tasks, and assessment practices that prioritize formal accuracy over strategic decision-making. Collectively, these factors negatively impact students' confidence, motivation, and readiness for professional translation, echoing concerns raised in international research (Kiraly, 2014; Rodríguez de Céspedes, 2019; Torres-Hostench, 2017).

The first key finding concerns the abstractness of theoretical knowledge. Students consistently reported difficulties in operationalizing translation models, such as functionalist approaches and equivalence frameworks, during real-world translation tasks. This aligns with prior research emphasizing the cognitive distance between theory and practice (Nord, 1997; Schäffner, 2012). Kiraly (2014) argued that students often perceive theoretical instruction as disconnected from practical application, a sentiment strongly reflected in this study's qualitative data. The implication is that theoretical knowledge, while necessary, is insufficient on its own to cultivate competent translators. Without structured opportunities to apply concepts meaningfully, students' understanding remains superficial and isolated from professional realities.

A second finding relates to limited authentic practice in translation curricula. Many students described classroom exercises as predictable and lacking real-world complexity. This resonates with González-Davies (2004, 2017), who highlighted the pedagogical value of situating students in realistic translation scenarios through cooperative or project-based activities. Authentic tasks facilitate the development of strategic competence, a core dimension of PACTE's (2017) translation competence model, encompassing decision-making, problem-solving, and contextual analysis. In contrast, the controlled and artificial tasks observed in the current study restrict

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opportunities for critical reflection and iterative learning, as emphasized in Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory.

The study also underscores the role of assessment misalignment in perpetuating the theory-practice gap. Students perceived that grading systems focused primarily on linguistic accuracy rather than strategic decision-making or thoughtful application of theory. This misalignment diminishes the incentive to engage with theoretical knowledge meaningfully, undermining motivation and limiting skill transfer. Similar patterns have been reported in European and North African contexts (Rodríguez de Céspedes, 2019; Al-Qinai, 2019), suggesting that assessment design is a critical lever for promoting authentic competence development. Aligning evaluation criteria with the pedagogical goal of integrating theory and practice is essential for enhancing both confidence and motivation.

Motivational consequences emerge as a central theme linking theory–practice integration to student engagement. Quantitative analyses demonstrated significant positive correlations between perceived integration and confidence ($r = .61$, $p < .01$) and between perceived relevance and motivation ($r = .58$, $p < .01$). Interview data corroborated these patterns, illustrating that students' motivation increases when tasks allow meaningful application of theoretical concepts but decreases when tasks are abstract or disconnected from practice. These findings align with self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), which posits that competence, autonomy, and relatedness are critical drivers of intrinsic motivation. When students experience authentic translation challenges, they feel competent and engaged, whereas abstract exercises diminish the sense of agency and purpose.

From a theoretical perspective, these findings reinforce the applicability of Kolb's (1984) experiential learning framework in translation pedagogy. The absence of structured cycles of experience, reflection, conceptualization, and experimentation in classroom tasks disrupts the consolidation of knowledge and prevents the development of strategic competence. Similarly, PACTE's (2017) model emphasizes the interrelatedness of instrumental, strategic, and linguistic competences. This study demonstrates that deficiencies in strategic and instrumental domains, manifested through

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abstract theory, limited practice, and misaligned assessment, directly impede students' professional readiness.

The implications for pedagogy and curriculum design are multifaceted. First, integrating project-based learning and cooperative translation tasks can provide students with realistic challenges that bridge theory and practice. Kiraly (2016) highlights the value of such tasks in fostering strategic decision-making, reflective practice, and peer-supported problem-solving. Second, the incorporation of technology-assisted translation tools, including computer-assisted translation (CAT) software and real-world corpora, can provide experiential contexts in which theoretical knowledge becomes operational. Third, assessment practices must evolve to reward thoughtful application, strategy selection, and reflective justification, rather than focusing narrowly on formal accuracy. Such alignment would reinforce the educational objective of developing holistic translator competence.

Institutional and policy implications are equally significant. Faculty development programs emphasizing experiential, competence-based pedagogy are critical to bridging the theory-practice gap. Teacher training should focus on designing authentic tasks, integrating technology, and creating assessment frameworks that reflect professional demands. Furthermore, partnerships with translation agencies or internships can expose students to professional decision-making processes, allowing them to connect theory with practice in meaningful ways. These interventions are consistent with González-Davies' (2017) recommendation that contextualized and collaborative learning environments are central to effective translation education.

Despite these contributions, the study has limitations. The sample is drawn from a single Moroccan university, which may limit generalizability to other educational contexts. Self-report instruments and interviews introduce potential bias, and longitudinal tracking of skill acquisition was not conducted, limiting insights into long-term professional outcomes. Nevertheless, the triangulation of quantitative and qualitative data strengthens the validity of the findings and provides a rich, student-centered perspective on the theory-practice gap.

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Future research should expand this inquiry across multiple institutions, incorporating longitudinal designs to track students' competence over time. Experimental studies evaluating specific pedagogical interventions such as project-based learning, cooperative tasks, and technology integration would provide empirical evidence for best practices. Additionally, exploring the perspectives of faculty and industry professionals can offer a more comprehensive understanding of the mechanisms underpinning the theory-practice gap.

Synthesis of findings indicates that the Moroccan translation education context shares many challenges with international programs but also presents context-specific nuances. Structural constraints, curricular design, and assessment practices collectively contribute to the persistence of the theory-practice gap. By foregrounding students' perceptions, this study illuminates the cognitive and motivational mechanisms underlying these challenges and offers actionable recommendations for curriculum reform, pedagogical innovation, and policy development.

In conclusion, the study extends current scholarship by integrating quantitative measures of perception with qualitative insights into lived experiences, offering a nuanced understanding of how translation students navigate the theory-practice gap. It underscores the critical need for experiential, competence-oriented pedagogy that aligns theoretical instruction, authentic practice, and assessment. By bridging these domains, translation education can more effectively prepare students for the complexities of professional translation, enhancing both engagement and competence.

Conclusion

This research examined Moroccan undergraduate translation students' perceptions and experiences of the theory-practice gap in translation education. While students value theoretical frameworks, their application is hindered by abstract instruction, limited authentic practice, and misaligned assessment. These factors collectively affect confidence, motivation, and preparedness for professional translation.

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To address this gap, curricula should incorporate project-based and cooperative learning, real-world translation exercises, and assessments aligned with strategic competence. Faculty training and institutional support are essential to implementing these reforms. Technology-assisted translation tools and industry partnerships can further enhance students' exposure to authentic translation contexts.

By highlighting students' perspectives, this study contributes to the design of context-sensitive, experiential translation pedagogy. It informs policy, curriculum design, and teaching practice, advancing understanding of how to bridge theory and practice effectively. Future research should expand these findings across multiple institutions and explore longitudinal outcomes, ensuring that graduates are fully prepared for professional translation challenges.

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